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“Ending a Conversation with System R”: Book Review of Nongbri’s “Before Religion.”

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Nongbri, Brent. 2013. *Before religion : a history of a modern concept*. New Haven : Yale University Press.

By: Jon Bialecki (University of Edinburgh)

On its face, Brent Nongbri’s book, *Before Religion*, is seemingly not about Christianity, but about religion more generally – or more specifically, about the category of religion more generally. Nongbri’s argument is that religion is not a human universal, but rather construction that has both a history and a genealogy (to the degree that those are two separate things). To Nongbri, this is important because treating religion as a universal has costs in both how the thought of the analyst ends up structuring whatever object he or she is addressing, and in how work is presumably consumed by readers, many of which will come to the term with a lot of baggage attached.

Nongbri avers that religion as currently understood is marked by a set of invariant features: it is about internal experience, takes the individual as the primary unit, is oriented around ideas and sacred texts, is separate from institutions such as government, is effectively private, and is something that is a response to a universal human need – and is therefore presumably also universally present as well. Finally, religion forms identified bodies – the ‘world religions’ such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity – which are all fungible to the extent that they are formally homologous. Because of this common structure, the relation between religion in the abstract and religions in particular is equivalent to the genus/species formulation, or to put it in a metalanguage borrowed from linguistics, religion is the type, and various ‘religions’ are tokens.

This mode of thought, though, was one that was brought about in part by the Protestant reformation (and the subsequent wars over religion) that shook Europe during the early modern period. This necessitated thinking about religions in the plural, as did the coeval challenges to then-extant European categorisations that resulted from increased contact with extra-European populations; this shift was also catalysed by the way that many of these extra-european populations, subject to the interpolating hails of colonialism and missionisation, found themselves arguing for the validity of various indigenous practises and discourses through articulating them by way of a ‘religious’ typology that was recognisable to Europeans. Before the transformation it was

rare to find the concept of religion or religions in the plural in the “West”; rather, what would now be recognised as a religion, such as Islam, was often understood instead as one of many Christian heresies, either lacking what was fully present in Christianity, or alternately deviating differently from what was glossed as true or proper religion.

Now, this is not an entirely novel argument – authors such as Talal Asad (1993) and Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) have put forward similar critiques, and Nongbri is careful to acknowledge his kinship and debt to these authors, as well as to others such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who are probably more familiar to those who work in the discipline of religious studies than in anthropology. One might think that this would be a detriment to this book, making it just another rehearsal of a song that most of the chorus knows by heart. The existence of previous iterations of this claim, however, actually is turned into a virtue by Nongbri: the collection and lucid explication of all these arguments in one place, in a way that is careful to acknowledge the particularities of each variant, is a useful turn. In fact, the clarity and measured pace of Nongbri’s writing in general suggests that this is a book more than suitable for undergraduates reading lists, despite its sometimes quite technical arguments.

However, exposition is not the only project taken up here. Nongbri sees his contribution as taking these already established arguments about the historic origins and attendant circumstance of religion as a category, and asking what does this mean for study of the ancient world. Here, the back projection of religion onto Rome, Greece, Egypt and Mesopotamia are seen as more galling anachronisms, since these were not cases where religion had a different meaning, as was the case on the cusp of the early modern period in Europe, but rather these were instances where religion was not present as a term at all. Nongbri argues vigorously that words such as “the Latin *religion*, Greek *thrēskeia*, and Arabic terms *dīn*, *milla*, and *umma*,” (26) are only improperly translated as “religion;” the Latin *religio*, for instance, expresses something more along the lines of scruples, reserve, rule or prohibition (whether human or divine in origin). Closer to the sense of religion that we are familiar with is the use of *religo* to indicate worship practices; but even this use is a poor fit for our use of the word, since what might be considered either to be a ritual, or a modality of being religious (such as prophecy) is individually a *religio*. This creates sense bending moments where things seem to be close to matching our understanding only to fall apart; in one moment, we’re told of early church material where Christianity is called a *religio* – only to be told that this *religio* was comprised of numerous other worship practices, each of which are separate and distinct *religio* as well. Nongbri even presented passages from Latin texts where *religio* seems to be the name of something along the lines of a failing or perhaps personality disorder, a term used for an obsessive concern about gods. Nongbri performs the same operation on historical turns that are often understood as the moment that the concept of religion was ‘born’ in antiquity. As just one example, for Nongbri the Maccabee revolt is not about the establishment of Ancient Judaism as an identity and a religion, but more properly understood both historically and linguistically as the triumph of the “Judaizing” party over their “Hellenizing” opponents. Likewise, Cicero, Eusebius and even early Islam are also presented as false dawns.

Nongbri does all this so as to give the term ‘religion’ a cold Wittgenstenian shower, to prevent us from misusing the word and to cure us from the confusion that such misuse calls. This involves not an overcoming of the term religion, but rather the uptake of a circumspect manner of using it. He separates ‘descriptive’ uses of the word from ‘redescriptive’ uses, a division that maps on to

the somewhat hoary but still workable 'emic/etic' distinction, or to first and second order use. Those who write in an academic manner about the-thing-often-referenced-as-religion should be more hygienic, Nongbri says, only using religion in the descriptive sense when the people they are referring to use it as well; conversely religion should be used in a redescriptive manner only as a place-holder, as something that does no analytic work and therefore carries no entailments. He does though leave open the possibility that religion may still work as a subjunctive category, where one can ask "what would happen if you viewed X as a religion?" This phrasing of the research question, of course, is meant to keep the hypothetical nature of the conjecture foregrounded, to keep the conceptual opening here from collapsing and becoming reified.

I started out this review with the observation that this book is not 'about' Christianity, at least at the level of surface appearances; Christianity is after all only one of the objects that are (mis?)labeled as a religion. However, Christianity seems to have historically done more than its share in the establishment of religion as a generic category, which could be read (as for instance Barber [2011] does) as basically the function of a heresiological Christian imperative, always on the lookout for unacceptable veneration and variation; according to this telling, the process got away from itself when a presumed Christian primacy was no longer tenable as a founding assumption, and the category of religion-in-the-generic was born. All this seems to be of help in one of the services that an anthropology of Christianity provides the wider discipline, which is an interrogation of how some Christian presumptions, for better or for worse, may be *sub rosa* shaping anthropology.

More interesting of course is the kind of ethnographic questions an approach like this one raises. Here, the question is not merely about how adherents to Christianity define the borders of Christianity (Garriott and O'Neill 2008), but how that topology of that extra-Christian hinterland is imagined as well. Take one example. Pentecostalism seems to have had either little uptake of this religions-in-the-plural model, or to have broken with it (depending on how ubiquitous you presume this religions-in-the-plural model was during the 19th century). Rathger, for the most part they engaged in a diabolization of indigenous more-than-human entities. The reason why this was done has been well worked out by anthropologists (Meyer 1999). What this approach suggests is that the costs and effects of this move on other forms of things-that-might-be-called-religion might be thought of as part of the same assemblage, each working on the other. If Christianity set the template in early modern Europe, might it do so again in different spaces, and in different ways? This turn also raises the possibility that as part of the "decolonisation of thought" (Latour 2009) we might even find somewhere beyond the Protestant pale Christian conceptions of the place and organisation of things-usually-conceived-of-as-religions that might be capable of doing some analytic work — if one is willing, of course, to put aside Nongbri's proposed ban on "redescriptive" uses of non-indigenous terms and concepts.

And that brings us to what might be the chief objection to Nongbri's book, and with others who would put forward the same critique. Nongbri is firm about his desire to foreclose entirely any discussion of religion as an unarticulated force or presence. To speak of people who have religion but no word "religion," of a concept without a Peircean symbol or a Saussurean signifier, or what Whorf calls "covert concepts," for him is a "conversation-ender." (23) You cannot think about that which has no word for it. This is nominalism in its undiluted form. But we can wonder whether this is the only choice that can be made if we accept Nongbri's central claim. We might start with the

observation that just because religion is a modern construct, that does not mean that religion, at least in the modern age, is not real. Religion as currently understood is a sustaining and self-perpetuating though not invariant force; and even if one accepts that religion as such did not exist in the ancient world, it seems that the previous systems of localised but interlocking local “pagan” deities formed such a system as well, or at least it did until it was destabilised by monotheism (Assman 2010). This suggests underlying or immanent sustaining processes. Further, given the fact that a) contemporary religion and b) prior systems of narratives and practices orientated towards more-than-human-actors both share a great deal of the same material, it seems possible that a genetic account (genetic in the sense of *generative* and not *genes*), based around one process or most likely a set of interlocking processes, might be a way to understand the production and proliferation of all these self-differentiating forms. This of course would most likely mean that some of the material produced by this process – let’s call it “Process R” for now – creates material that falls out of the current definition of religion, and perhaps out of even our contemporary sense of things that are related or similar to religion as well. Alternately, it may be that “Process R” as a genetic process would only create a small swath of the territory that constitutes “religion” as (im)properly understood in the present day, and that a lot of other aspects and material are taken from other social and cultural processes to form varying assemblages called religion. Perhaps “Process R” does both, not completely determining or generating every particular object or practice that constitutes religion in the contemporary sense, but still playing some role in alternative systems or previous dispensations like magic, small scale societies interactions with non-human actors, or the pantheons found in the ancient world.

At the very least, there is the fact that religion, and the things that Nongbri says are mischaracterised as religion, not only vary historically but also vary as distributed in social and geographic territory, and yet at the same time these things interlink and spill over each other, intermeshing with or succeeding each other. This is a phenomenon that Nongbri himself notes in his book, when he tells us of how Manicheism understood itself as an orthodox form of Christianity in the West, and as a form of Buddhism in the East, or when he recites the way that the Buddha became the Catholic Saint Iosaph as the narrative of the Buddha’s origins travelled West. This vast interlocking system stretching through space and time forms something on the order of an abstract “phase space,” a “possibility space” (DeLanda 2011) comprised of all the historical mutations and transformations of some object that, at least in some point in history, was called religion. Let’s call this “Possibility Space R.”

Now, neither of these thoughts are strictly impossible if one only accepts Nongbri’s challenge to the category of religion; in fact, the idea of a historical becoming of religion as a category or of a time without religion as an entity leads us in the direction of these concepts. But a ban on *sub rosa*, *in potentia*, or underdeveloped aspects of religion – exactly that which is demanded by the nominalism in Nongbri – would make this thought difficult, and perhaps impossible (and its telling that Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblance, the least nominalist aspect of Wittgenstein’s work, is exiled to a few lines in the endnotes, and neither embraced or argued against). Process R and Possibility Space R, no matter whether that R is, be it cultural, social, cognitive or even something far stranger, is an unspeakable object for Nongbri, and hence we shouldn’t bring it up, even as a question. This seems to be the definition of a “conversation ender” to me.

But this may not be an objection for everyone, and it certainly doesn’t undo the salutary aspects

of the book. While it is not revolutionary, Nongbri's book is excellent, easily consumable by undergraduates yet offering insight for those who might think about these issues at a slightly more taxing level. Just be sure that the book's nominalist presumptions doesn't covertly allow something intended to catalyse thought become a block to it instead.

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